

CONTEMPORARY COMEDIANS.

By Morris Bacheller.



THAT cultured *litterateur*, M. Taine, would have us go to the stage for a reflection of the "very age and body of the time, its form and pressure." Contemporary criticism has now long occupied itself in inveighing against what appears to be the reigning dramatic taste. If there be any truth in that criticism, yet it is certainly not for lack of capable comedians that the comedy of the day does not occupy as a whole a higher level. With this loud plaint constantly ringing in our ears, it is an added pleasure to call to mind some of those talented men and women, whose effort and example have tended in the direction of refined and artistic work. We have in this country such a wide field of sterling comedians that any limited selection must necessarily be invidious if for the purpose of comparison; but the following general favorites, selected almost at random, typify

the high average of ability that distinguishes the guild of American histrions.

It is difficult to know by what appellation to characterize one so versatile as Mr. Richard Mansfield. Though but thirty five years of age, he is today one of the foremost figures of the American drama. He is a man of literary cultivation, a talented amateur of the brush, an exquisitely artistic singer, a character actor of striking originality, a subtle comedian, and a truthful and studious tragedian.

After a varied career he took the part of the *Baron Chevrial* in "A Parisian Romance" at the Union Square Theater in 1883. What was originally an almost incidental character, this actor by his consummate art soon converted into one of the most thrilling roles of latter years. The country still shudders at his fearful pointing of the psychologic problem embodied in the drama of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," while the varied fragrance of a lady's toilet table permeates the memory of "Beau Brummel."

Effort and personal means were thrown away in what the more thinking public considers Mr. Mansfield's most valuable work—the splendid production of "Richard III," the failure of which, to the actor's severe financial embarrassment, may be accepted as a final and clinching evidence of America's present indifference to sterling tragedy.

To speak of Edward H. Sothorn as a rising man is no reflection on his station in the dramatic firmament at this time. His success has been truly remarkable for one so young to the stage. But that success as a



RICHARD MANSFIELD AS BEAU BRUMMEL.

star has been almost entirely confined to those characters which, like that of *Lord Chumley*, though immensely amusing, do not demand very serious consideration. Perhaps no greater reputation could be expected in this line, but Mr. Sothern in "The Maister of Woodbarrow," and recently in "The Dancing Girl" has given evidences of such subdued strength of dramatic acting as to open to him a newer and a higher vista of fame.

Mr. Sothern is the son of the great *Dundreary*. The inherited instinct for art exhibited itself in his choice of painting as a profession, though the stage was really his heart's desire. His gravitation toward the boards was inevitable, and in 1879 he made his debut. His early work was with his father's company. Later, when he achieved a prominence of his own, his lines were cast in roles similar to the elder Sothern's celebrated impersonation, and he was eminently successful—yet, while no friend doubts his success as a possible *Dundreary* Mr. Sothern has chosen reverently to

bury that character with its late embodiment.

During a season as leading man with Miss Helen Dauvray in 1884, Mr. Sothern gave earnest of his versatility in such characters as *Captain Gregory*, in "One of our Girls," *Prosper Couramont* in "A Scrap of Paper," and *Wildrake* in "The Love Chase." But his first star part, *Jack Hammerton* in "The Highest Bidder," was his greatest and most instant success, and gave him his really valuable introduction to the American public.

A successful career of nearly forty years as "first old man" distinguishes William J. Le Moyne. Born in Boston in 1832, he was at eighteen one of the founders of the amateur Aurora Dramatic Club, with which he made his first public appearance in 1851. In the following year he did his first professional work, and within a twelvemonth made a widely toured hit as the original *Deacon Perry* in "Uncle Tom's Cabin."



E. H. SOTHERN AS THE DUKE OF GUISEBURY.

At the outbreak of the civil war, while leading man at the Boston Athenæum, he raised a company of volunteers, which he captained through several early battles, to be wounded and incapacitated at South Mountain. Successive engagements, principally at Daly's in New York, and the Globe and the Museum in Boston, filled the years preceding his permanent residence in New York as a member of the Madison Square and Lyceum stock companies.

Mr. Le Moyne holds that versatility is not an actor's best ambition; while he himself has exhibited it to a conspicuous degree, his devotion to one line, and the best of that line, has perfected his methods to the highest degree of refined art. In comedy of the old school he is the embodied *Courtly*; as the contemporary man of affairs he admirably renders the modern clean cut directness of manner, combined with the perfect polish of ripe experience and good breeding.

In all that Mr. Le Moyne has ever done, whether old men, character or eccentric parts, one leading quality is patent to all observers—his painstaking and conscientious work, both in detail and in general, in conception as well as execution.

Miss Rose Coghlan, in some phases of her career, holds an enviable place before the American public. Were her selection of plays as a star, and her rendition of them, always up to the level of her artistic intelligence, she would ever merit the praise still laid at her feet whenever she performs the remarkable role of *Peg Woffington*.

Miss Coghlan was born in Peterborough, England, in 1853. At sixteen she appeared, it is said, as one



WILLIAM J. LE MOYNE.

of the three Macbeth witches. From that time she received a varied and thorough schooling until finally called to the famous Wallack Company, where, with surpassing dash and spirit, mingled with the finest touches, she came to be regarded as a preëminent impersonator of such sterling old comedy roles as *Lady Teazle* and *Lady Gay Spanker*.

After leaving the Wallack forces, she was recalled to join them in the memorable revival of ten old comedies that marked the regretted disbandment in 1888 of what had long been the leading stock company of this country.

Since then, Miss Coghlan has starred in a variety of plays: her most noted roles are *Stephanie de Mohrivar*, the adventuress, calling for a display of artful and bewitching cajolery, and *Peg Woffington*, the



ROSE COGHLAN.

many sided heroine of the drama based on Charles Reade's touching story. The latter role has been filled by no one in latter years so acceptably as by Miss Coghlan, whose characteristic dash and fire in the lighter scenes are markedly contrasted with transitory moments of more tender sensibilities.

The seventieth birthday of an American actress in London was deemed an event of sufficient note to occupy some valuable space in the cable dispatches of the New York dailies in October last. This lady was Mrs. George H. Gilbert, who, a member of Mr. Augustin Daly's company for almost twenty two years, is still actively engaged on the stage.

The accent of air, manner or dress that so often characterizes the actress is entirely lacking from Mrs. Gilbert's personality in private life, and this same absence of the theatrical is, to the average

play goer, the most patent characteristic of her acting. With this enduring impression in mind, it is difficult to imagine this same lady pirouetting in the ballet for her earliest performance. Yet it is true that at an early age she studied dancing under Paul Taglioni at the Italian Opera in London, being led to this step by the reverses of her father, who had been editor of the *Morning Post*.

Her married name is that of a pantomimist, whom she wedded in 1846; her maiden name, Ann Hartley. Three years after their marriage, the pair came to this country, and Mrs. Gilbert made her serious début in speaking parts at Cleveland in 1857. From that time, and by advice, she has played those characters known in stage parlance as "first old women," and it

can hardly be controverted that in this line Mrs. Gilbert takes the very highest professional rank today.



MRS. GEORGE H. GILBERT.



JAMES LEWIS.

Though seen with but one company during twenty two years, James Lewis has an international reputation of a high order as a really comic comedian. Few actors would seem to need so little in the way of fun provoking makeup as does this gentleman. His face is admirably adapted to the expression of humor, and his conversation and whole personality breathe the spirit of mirth. He has a certain grotesque individuality all his own which is never en-

tirely absent from his assumed character, no matter in what mold it may be cast or what coloring the actor's unique intelligence may give it ; and yet this individuality, be it noted, is entirely apart from mannerism.

The manner of his entering the ranks of his profession was singular. When a youth of nineteen he studied an actor friend's part in a few hours, and presented himself unannounced to the manager as a substitute. He was suffered to go on ; on coming off



JOHN DREW.

the manager offered to the youth a place and salary, and they were accepted.

The style of acting of Mr. John Drew is quite typical of that quality which has long drawn to Daly's theater the most uniformly fashionable audiences. They see in the acting of this "juvenile lover" or leading man the ease, elegance, and perfection of manner that characterizes good society, joined with tasteful perception, truth and delicacy. In the bold Daly adaptations of Shaksperian plays Mr. Drew, with other members of the company, has been criticised for his nineteenth century manners. This but enforces his possession of the qualities already named, in connection with the airy and graceful comedies most largely filling the repertory of this theater.

But there is one Shaksperian role in which Mr. Drew has received little else than unstinted praise. *Petruchio*, the boisterous wooer, he plays with a fine distinction; the violence is upon the surface, while the true worth of the fellow constantly glimmers through it. Another success out of the general trend of his assignments was made in 1887 in the strongly colored character part of *Major Garvey*, in "Dandy Dick"—a highly seasoned Indian officer finally tempered by the amenities of love. In his more conventional roles Mr. Drew is dashing and breezy—always the perfect gentleman.

Mr. Drew should be about thirty eight years of age, and is of high dramatic lineage. His father, originally from Dublin, was one of the best Irish comedians on the stage; his brothers and sisters are widely and very favorably known here, while his mother,

Mrs. John Drew, is unequalled in old high standard comedy, and, with one exception, is unranked in general "old woman" parts.

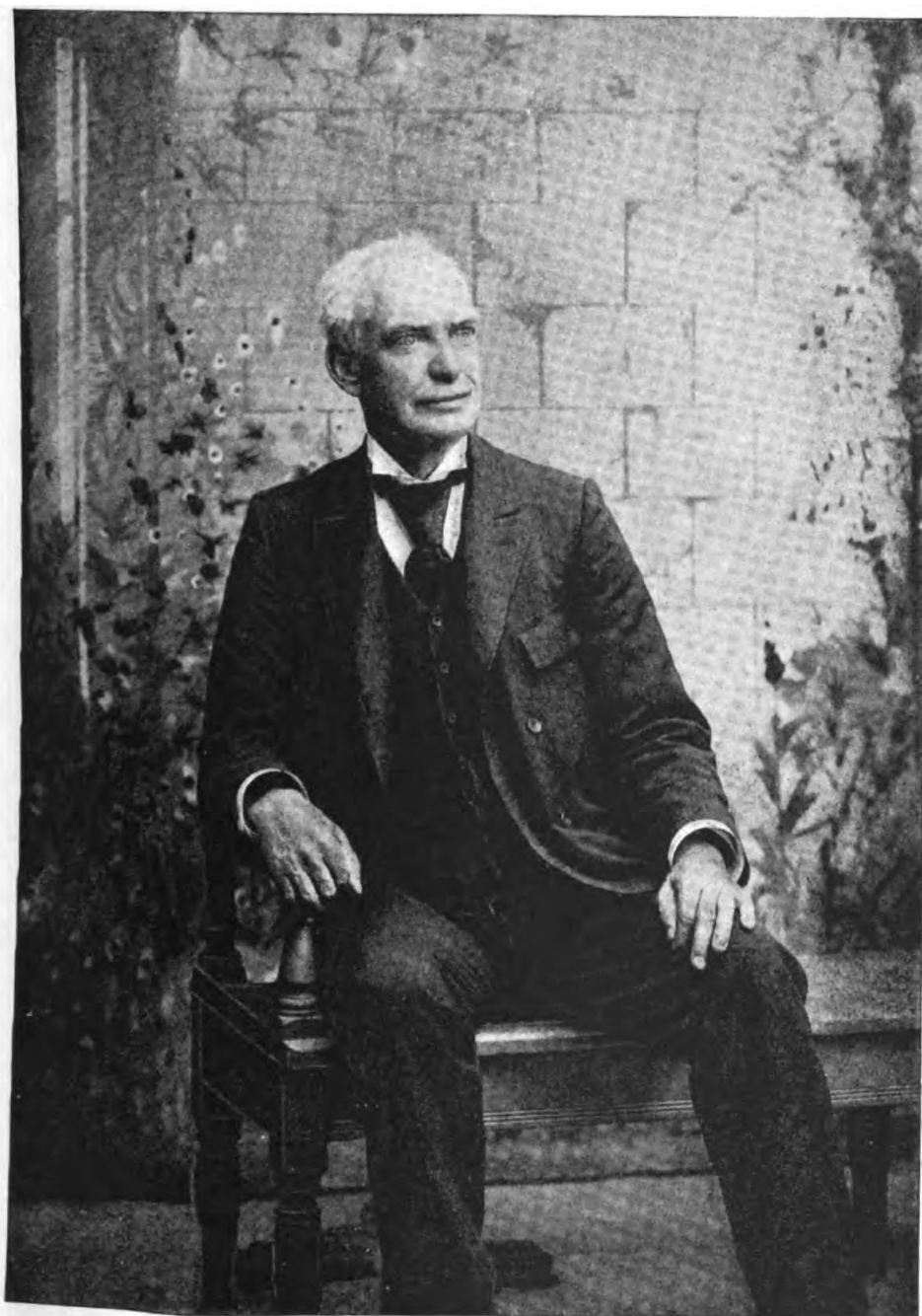
In James H. Stoddart this country possesses one of its very pillars of dramatic strength. Born in Yorkshire, England, in 1826, he came of Scotch parentage and received his early dramatic training in boys' parts, under his father's eye. In 1853 he came to this country with a letter to the elder Wallack and began that career as a character actor which perhaps includes a larger number of truly strong creations than any other American actor can boast.

The individuality of each of Mr. Stoddart's character creations is distinct, and his genuine power in heavy roles has often been the prin-

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JAMES H. STODDART.

principal strength of past productions. The impression of his work with the famous Union Square Theater, which he joined in 1876, is still vivid in many minds, because it was composed of the most valuable and enduring qualities.

No better suggestion of the wide extent and variety of his talented work can be made than to cite in comparison his intense and powerful impersonation of *Pierre Michel*, miser and assassin, with his delicate and

finely shaded acting of the tender hearted brother in that impressive fable "A Pair of Spectacles." At the present time he is one of the foremost leading "old men" on our stage.

Mr. Stoddart is a gentleman of culture and quiet tastes. His leisure is spent on his New Jersey farm with his wife, who was a noted figure as singing comedienne in the days of the old Olympic and the elder Wallack's play houses, under the stage



AGNES BOOTH.

names of Miss Phillips and Miss Conover.

Mrs. Agnes Booth Schoeffel, now in her forty eighth year, has earned a representative place upon the American stage. High modern comedy and delicate literary character find no more graceful interpreter. She handles the finer emotions with an unerring directness born of true artistic feeling and a technical skill of the keenest finesse.

Beginning her career in Australia at the age of sixteen, she came to this country in 1858, married the popular but unfortunate comedian, Harry Perry, and began to make a name with the celebrated Mrs. John Wood. In New York she won a place in the company of Edwin Forrest, where her reputation was firmly established.

Having been widowed after a short married life, she became the wife of Junius Brutus Booth, and practically ended her history as an actress of classic roles with the famous production of "Sardanapalus" at the old Booth Theater in 1876.

Since that time her work has been mainly in the more congenial direction of the finely discriminating roles of high comedy. The intelligent charm of her work in this department is fittingly illustrated by an incident in connection with her portrayal of *Mrs. Florence Brownlee* in Bronson Howard's fine sketch, "Old Love Letters." The dramatist was so impressed with the artistic impersonation of his own creation that he presented to Agnes Booth the right to use it during the term of the copyright.